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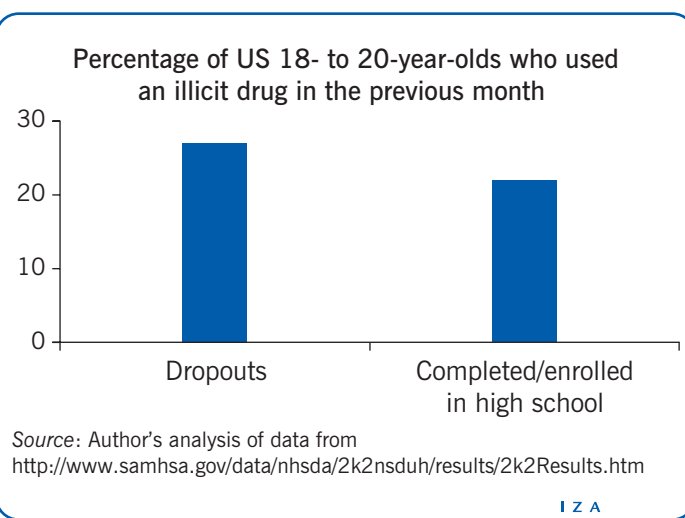
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Evidence-based policy making

Does substance use affect educational outcomes?

There is little evidence that substance use reduces educational attainment

ELEVATOR PITCH

A non-trivial portion of traffic fatalities involve alcohol or illicit drugs. But does the use of alcohol and illegal substances—which is linked to depression, suicide, and criminal activity—also reduce academic performance? Recent studies suggest that drinking alcohol has a negative, if modest, effect on grades, and although students who use illegal substances are more likely to drop out of school than those who do not, this may reflect the influence of other, difficult-to-measure factors at the individual level, such as personality.

Percentage of US 18- to 20-year-olds who used an illicit drug in the previous month

Source: Author's analysis of data from http://www.samhsa.gov/data/nhsda/2k2nsduh/results/2k2Results.htm

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KEY FINDINGS

Pros

⊕ Alcohol consumption has only a modest effect on academic performance as measured by grades.

⊕ Even binge drinking appears to have, at most, a modest impact on academic performance.

⊕ Alcohol use does not appreciably reduce the probability of attending, or graduating from, university.

Cons

⊖ There is evidence, albeit weak, that drinking reduces the probability of graduating from high school.

⊖ Illicit drug use by students is generally unresponsive to policy intervention.

⊖ Because illicit drug use is unresponsive to policy, very little is known about its relationship to educational outcomes.

AUTHOR'S MAIN MESSAGE

The effect of alcohol use on educational attainment appears to be either small or non-existent. Although alcohol use may have a negative impact on academic performance, this effect also appears to be modest. Illicit drug use is associated with poor educational outcomes, but no causal relationship has been demonstrated. Illicit drug use is unresponsive to policy, so credible natural experiments are rare. Without them, the effects of substance use cannot be distinguished from those of personal characteristics. Given these results, it is difficult to make a strong case for policy intervention.